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12 Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., leading a congressional investigation into the spreading Iran-Contra aid affair, said Saturday the secret White House network that engineered the mission was acting under high-level orders "and I want to find out who gave the orders."

Vice President George Bush, linked to fired National Security Council staff member Lt. Col. Oliver North, was asked Saturday if he played any part in the scheme.

"No role in it," he told NBC News, declining further comment.

President Reagan, in seclusion in California, acknowledged in his Saturday radio address that he has been "occupied with the Iranian issue over the last two weeks" but sought to shift attention from the scandal to economic issues.

Reagan was reportedly telephoning conservative columnists to explain his side of the issue and saying if he had it to do over again he would take the same action.

North, also questioned by NBC, refused comment on the affair.

"My plans are now to trust in the Lord and a good lawyer," he said.

On Capitol Hill, Democrats and at least one Republican made it clear the issue will be kept at the forefront for weeks to come.

"Your presidency, sir, is tottering," Sen. Daniel Moynihan, D-N.Y., said in response to Reagan's address. "It can be saved but only you can save it and only if you will talk with us, the Congress."

Staunch Reagan supporter Sen. Larry Pressler, R-S.D., a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, was critical of the arms operation for the first time Saturday and called for the resignation of Chief of Staff Donald Regan, who sources have said knew of the Iran arms-Contra connection.

Pressler reportedly said Regan "epitomizes the arrogance of power."

Reached at his home in Vermont, Leahy, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, made it clear the panel is committed to a long, deep formal investigation into the arms deals, starting Monday, and tough challenges will be made to statements by Reagan and other administration officials.

He said all witnesses must be prepared to testify under oath and any documents subpoenaed must be made available -- in one piece -- or the administration will "have a very difficult time explaining that."

There are widespread reports that documents that may be crucial to an investigation of the controversy were shredded by North, fired from his post Tuesday at the National Security Council because of the affair.

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The New York Times reported Saturday that departed national security adviser John Poindexter also was believed to have destroyed stacks of sensitive documents last weekend, though it was not clear if they concerned the arms sales.

White House officials, asked for comment on the latest revelations, said Saturday that all those matters were under Justice Department investigation and it would be improper to discuss them.

An investigation by Attorney General Edwin Meese, who first revealed the Contra connection on Tuesday, began last Friday but it was not until Tuesday that the files of North and Poindexter were secured.

"This is a disgrace," Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., told the Times.

Leahy and committee chairman Sen. Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., sent a letter to Reagan saying "we expect all material to be maintained intact. We do not want to see any shredded, removed or destroyed, because we're going to see it all," Leahy said. He would not say who would be called to testify.

However, "I'm convinced that Col. North did not act alone," Leahy told United Press International, "nor could he to set up accounts, transfer large amounts of arms to the worldwide clandestine operation and do that acting alone.

"He would need to work with others, some in our intelligence agencies, like the CIA. Most of the people who would aid him would not do it unless they could be assured that they were acting under orders. I want to find out who gave the orders.

"He had to report back to someone, and I want to find out who."

Leahy said he personally favors the appointment of a Watergate-style special prosecutor because it would "send a powerful message" and, "I want people tried and convicted."

Rep. Robert Torricelli, D-N.Y., a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, called Saturday for pooling separate committee investigations into one "rather than making this into a shooting gallery."